



Federal Update for January 19 - 23, 2015



VA and U.S. Tennis Association Foundation Partner to Make Tennis More Accessible to Veterans

Washington – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is partnering with the U.S. Tennis Association (USTA) Foundation, Inc., to make exercise more readily available to VA patients.

The VA/USTA Foundation partnership will facilitate the formation of tennis clinics at VA medical facilities, link VA medical facilities with community resources and provide consulting and design services for VA facilities interested in upgrading or building tennis courts.

“Exercise and physical activity is an important component of health and wellness and has been shown to provide numerous physical and mental health benefits,” said Interim Under Secretary for Health Carolyn M. Clancy, MD. “We are very excited to be partnering with the USTA Foundation to improve Veterans’ physical fitness and ultimately their overall health and well-being.”

The USTA Foundation will support VA in the form of coaching, instruction, equipment or use of courts or other technical assistance to sustain a tennis clinic, along with the recently developed “Warrior Tennis Curriculum,” an electronic manual that provides rehabilitation therapists guidance through text, pictures and videos on how to use tennis as a therapeutic option to help Veterans stay fit and active.

“The USTA Foundation is honored to partner with the Department of Veteran Affairs in helping to enhance and improve the rehabilitation needs of our country’s Veterans through tennis,” said Dan Faber, Executive Director, USTA Foundation. “We are committed to providing the tools needed for VA facilities

around the country to incorporate tennis into their existing rehabilitation programs. Together, we are striving to provide an opportunity for our Veterans to stay active and fit in tribute to their sacrifice and bravery.”

With more than eight million Veterans enrolled, VA operates the largest integrated health care delivery system in the United States. The USTA Foundation is the philanthropic arm of the US Tennis Association.

VA Issues Statement on Denver VA Replacement Medical Center

The Department of Veterans Affairs continues to work to complete the Denver replacement VA Medical Center project without further delay while delivering the best value to taxpayers under current circumstances. The situation in Denver is unacceptable to Veterans, taxpayers and Department leadership.

Our obligation is to ensure VA doesn’t allow such an outcome to occur again by learning all we can from past mistakes and put in place corrective actions to improve future performance. Veterans and taxpayers also expect a thorough review be completed and those responsible are held accountable. With these objectives in mind, the following actions are being taken:

As previously announced, VA is partnering with the Army Corps of Engineers to advise on the current construction and on the overall management of this project as part of the transition to negotiate a long-term contract and manage the project until completion.

Today, we are announcing that VA has requested that the Corps complete a detailed examination of the VA major construction program to improve management processes, structures, and controls in project oversight and delivery. The Department is also convening an Administrative Investigation Board to review all aspects of the Denver project to determine the facts that led to the current situation and gather evidence of any misconduct or mismanagement that contributed to this unacceptable outcome.

Effective immediately, the Department's Construction and Facility Management organization will report to the Deputy Secretary through the Office of Management.

VA Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson was onsite at the Denver replacement project today and will continue regular visits to the site. VA senior leadership is actively engaged on the project, and the facility construction continues to progress. We are continuing to work with our partners to ensure timely completion of the project for the Veterans of the Colorado area.

MCRMC Update ► Pentagon Bracing for Upcoming Proposals

The Pentagon is bracing for one of its biggest political battles in years as a blue-ribbon commission on military compensation and retirement nears the end of its two-year study and moves closer to releasing its proposals for change by 1 FEB. An internal document obtained by Military Times reveals the Defense Department is setting up a rapid-response plan that will scrutinize the commission's potentially controversial proposals and send a recommendation to President Obama within 60 days, or by 1 APR. DoD leaders have no idea what the independent commission will propose to Congress, so they have tapped a team of high-level officials to review, analyze and prepare a formal response to influence a potentially historic vote on Capitol Hill. The stakes are high; the commission's report is likely to set off a far-reaching debate about the future of the military compensation system, with a basic structure that has changed little over the past century.

In some ways, the Pentagon is eager to support big changes that might cut personnel costs and reduce long-term defense spending and save money for investments in research and new weapons systems. At the same time, military officials worry that sweeping changes to military compensation — such as radically changing the current retirement system — could devastate recruiting and retention and threaten the long-term health of the 41-year-old all-volunteer force. The report from the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC) will include detailed legislation that members of Congress may immediately begin debating, revising or potentially putting to a vote. The

commission's recommendations likely will include contentious proposals, such as replacing the military's 20-year cliff-vesting retirement model, creating new incentive pays or eliminating some in-kind benefits that service members receive in the form of installation-based services.

As the Pentagon and the White House begin facing pointed questions about how the proposals might impact readiness, defense officials will launch an intensive internal review that ultimately will inform Obama's official position.

- From 2 FEB thru 6 FEB several Pentagon "working groups," as well as a team from the RAND Corp, think tank, immediately will begin to analyze the proposals, according to the internal DoD document. Separate "working groups" will study topics that include "pay and retirement," "health benefits" and "quality of life benefits," according to the four-page PowerPoint, dated 18 DEC. The working groups will mostly include officers at the O-6 level from each service and civilians at a similar pay grade. Specifically, the analysis will focus on the potential impact on recruiting and retention and will aim to "develop the DoD response for Presidential consideration," according to the document.
- From 9 to 13 FEB the working groups will convene at an "off-site location" for further analysis.
- From 17 to 19 FEB members of the working groups will brief their services' senior leaders on the status of the Pentagon's official response.
- By 26 FEB senior leaders, including the undersecretary for personnel and readiness, will receive a draft of the formal response.
- By 6 MAR the Joint Chiefs will vet DoD's official position on the commission recommendations. At the same time, Pentagon civilian leaders will reviewing it in a process led by Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work.
- By 13 MAR the defense secretary will approve or reject a final version of the Pentagon's response. It's unclear at this point if that will be outgoing Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel or his successor, Ash Carter, who is likely to be confirmed by the Senate in early 2015.
- From there the official response will go to the White House, where it will face further review.
- The DoD plan aims to have Obama provide formal recommendations to Congress by 1 APR. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Andrew Tilghman | Dec. 30, 2014 ++]

QRMC Update ► Obama Cancels 2016 Review

President Obama has decided that the military does not need another high-level review of military compensation. In a memo released 9 JAN, Obama said he will not order the Pentagon to conduct its next Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation, or QRMC, which was due to ramp up this year. Obama said the need for such a review will be satisfied by a similar effort, the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, or MCRMC, which Congress created in 2013. That commission is due to deliver its report to Capitol Hill by 1 FEB.

The publication of that commission's report in a few weeks could prompt Congress to take action on the controversial issue of military pay and benefits. The military's top brass say change is needed because personnel costs are soaring, which makes it hard to find money for weapons modernization and high-tech research. It's likely that the commission will recommend changes to the current 20-year cliff-vesting retirement system. The commission's report would likely overshadow another QRMC, which is created by the Pentagon bureaucracy. It's a highly technical analysis of military pay and benefits that is conducted every four years to ensure the current system can support a healthy all-volunteer force. The last one, the 11th QRMC, was published in June 2012. To meet a traditional publication date of mid-2016, the Pentagon would have to start the long bureaucratic process this year. But Obama said a 12th QRMC is "not required."

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Andrew Tilghman | Jan. 10, 2015 ++]

POW/MIA Update ► Agency Merge Begins

The Pentagon is taking the first steps to set up a new agency that will direct the troubled effort to search for America's missing war dead, two years after an internal report found the current prisoner of war program was mismanaged and wasteful. Defense officials say they will begin merging two existing agencies into one POW-MIA office that will be more streamlined and effective. The new organization will be running next year. The decision comes as Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel prepares to leave the Pentagon. Last March Hagel announced he would create a new office to deal with POW-MIA issues that would be more focused and innovative. The failings of the POW-MIA program were highlighted in 2013 when The Associated Press disclosed a report that called the program acutely dysfunctional. [Source: The Associated Press | Lolita Baldor | Jan. 09, 2014 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,539) Korean War (7,685), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,638), 1991 Gulf War (0), and OEF/OIF (6). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/accounted_for.

For additional information on the Defense Department's mission to account for missing Americans, visit the Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) web site at <http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo> or call or call (703) 699-1169. The remains of the following MIA/POW's have been recovered, identified, and scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin:

Vietnam

The Defense POW/MIA Office announced the identification of remains belonging to Air Force Col. William E. Cooper, 45, of Albany, Ga., was assigned to the 469th Tactical Squadron, 388th Tactical Fighter Wing, when his F-105D Thunderchief was shot down while on a strike mission on a highway-railroad bridge north of Hanoi, North Vietnam, on April 24, 1966. He will be buried with full military honors on a date and location yet to be determined.

Korea

The Defense POW/MIA Office announced the identification of remains belonging to Army Cpl. Francis D. Knobel, 20, of La Crosse, Wis., was assigned to Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, when he was lost Dec. 12, 1950, in North Korea. He will be buried with full military honors on a date and location yet to be determined.

World War II

The Defense POW/MIA Office announced the identification of remains belonging to Army Air Forces Maj. Peyton S. Mathis Jr., 28, of Montgomery, Ala. On June 5, 1944, Mathis was piloting a P-38J Lightning when the aircraft lost power while attempting to land at Kukum Air Field on Guadalcanal Island in the Solomon Islands. A rescue team located the crash site but was unable to recover Mathis because the aircraft was submerged in a dense jungle swamp. He will be buried with full military honors on a date and location yet to be determined.

[Source: http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/ Jan. 13, 2014 ++]

VA Medical Marijuana Update ► \$2M Grant to Research Effectiveness

The state of Colorado awarded a \$2 million grant for research on the effectiveness of marijuana to treat posttraumatic stress, giving hope to backers of a federally approved study that the research will begin. The Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment decided 17 DEC to provide \$7.6 million for eight medical marijuana studies, including one on veterans with combat-related PTSD sponsored by the California-based nonprofit Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies. The research received approval last March from the federal Health and Human Services Department and was to get underway at the University of Arizona and other locations within a year. But the program was delayed after the Tucson, Arizona, school terminated the contract of primary researcher Dr. Sue Sisley in July.

The Colorado grant money will help support the research involving 76 veterans at two sites — in Arizona with Sisley and at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland under the direction of Ryan Vandrey. Marcel Bonn Miller with the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine and Dr. Paula Riggs, University of Colorado School of Medicine, will oversee coordination and scientific integrity of the study. MAPS founder and executive director Rick Doblin called the award a "big step forward for cannabis science and medicine." "As the very first public funding that MAPS has ever received in our 28½-year history, the award clearly shows that attitudes are improving about research into the therapeutic benefits of Schedule I drugs," Doblin said.

Sisley and MAPS have worked for more than four years to develop the study protocol and win federal approval for it. The protocol calls for veterans with PTSD

to be divided into groups and receive the equivalent of two joints a day — 0.9 grams — to smoke or inhale by vaporization. Each participant then will submit weekly observations and confirm that he or she followed protocols. Sisley's termination from her job has not been the only obstacle to the research. As part of the federal government's requirements, MAPS must buy Drug Enforcement Agency-licensed marijuana, which is controlled by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and that agency is still cultivating marijuana of the correct potency of tetrahydrocannabinol and cannabidiol needed for the research. In addition, Sisley's portion of the study needs new approval from an institutional review board, and MAPS will need clearance from the Drug Enforcement Agency once it receives a delivery date for the marijuana, Doblin said.

In an email exchange with Military Times, Sisley said she also is still looking for a place to conduct the research. She has several leads in the Phoenix area and is trying secure an academic appointment at a university. "My goal has always been to continue this research in Arizona. I refuse to turn my back on these dedicated Arizona veterans," Sisley said. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | Jan 11, 2015 ++]

VA Data Breach Update ► Website Put 7,000 Vets at Risk

The Department of Veterans Affairs has disclosed a security flaw in a patient database that put information on more than 7,000 veterans in public view. The information, including names, Social Security numbers and birthdates was contained in a single document that could be accessed via a specific web address on a public facing telehealth website run by a Veterans Health Administration contractor. The name of the contractor was not released. The flaw was first reported to the VA on 4 NOV, and was publicly announced in a Christmas Eve news release.

According to a VA incident report released by the agency, the personal information was exposed for several years. The web address was not linked within the site, per the incident report, and a user would have to have knowledge of the address to access the document. The VA was alerted to the security flaw via an anonymous email, believed to have been sent by a contractor employee, which included personal information on five veterans. The email was sent to senior

leaders at VA, triggering an investigation. The security flaw was quickly patched with the assistance of the VA's Network and Security Operations Center (NSOC), and monitoring services were offered to 7,054 veterans whose information was potentially compromised.

A VA spokesperson contacted by FCW didn't clarify whether the anonymous source for the security flaw was acting as a whistleblower, or had some other agenda. The incident report indicates that the vendor identified and fired one employee as the likely culprit, although that employee denied being the source of the email. An NSOC review of the vendor's user logs couldn't definitely conclude who had accessed the data, or whether the entire contents of the database were compromised. The document in question was accessed, according to usage logs, but it's not known by whom, or whether the information was copied by the user.

VA is a popular target for cyber criminals. Network defenses detected more than 15 million intrusion attempts in November alone, and blocked more than 88 million suspicious inbound emails. The Einstein 3 network monitoring tool operated by the Department of Homeland Security is the first line of defense for the agency, and regularly deflects millions of potentially risky inbound emails and other possible attacks. But even with Einstein 3 in place, the VA still has work to do to satisfy internal security auditors. The VA flunked its fiscal 2014 audit as required under the Federal Information Security Management Act. In a November call with reporters, VA CIO Stephen Warren said that outstanding fixes from the 2013 FISMA report needed to be put in place, and that the 2014 report, due out in March, will seek improved standardization in system configuration and tighter access controls. Although the website flaw has been fixed, the VA is planning to further investigate the possible exfiltration of the veterans' data from the VA network, according to the incident report. [Source: FCW | Adam Mazmanian | Jan 05, 2015 ++]

Agent Orange / C-123 Aircraft Update ► IOM Key Findings

Between 1972 and 1982, approximately 1,500 to 2,100 U.S. Air Force (AF) Reserve personnel trained and worked on C-123 aircraft that previously had been used to spray herbicides, including Agent Orange (AO), during Operation Ranch Hand (ORH) in the Vietnam War. Samples taken from these aircraft show the presence

of AO residues. However, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) considers AF Reservists who served in ORH C-123s ineligible for health care and disability coverage under the Agent Orange Act of 1991.

The VA asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to evaluate whether service in ORH C-123s could have exposed AF Reservists to herbicide residues at levels harmful to their health. In the 'Post-Vietnam Dioxin Exposure in Agent Orange–Contaminated C-123 Aircraft' report, an expert IOM committee performs a qualitative assessment based on the science and evidence available. The committee's key findings are summarized below.

Assessment of Available Information

- C-123 aircraft that had sprayed herbicides during Operation Ranch Hand (ORH) in the Vietnam War were returned to the United States and were among the aircraft used by Air Force (AF) reservists from 1972 to 1982.
- Documentation of most aspects of the pattern of work performed by AF reservists on these aircraft has not been recovered (and is unlikely to be retrieved in the future).
- Sampling was conducted on the ORH C-123s long after the AF reservists' service and was not extensive. The committee finds that the methods used for surface sampling appear reliable, while methods used for air sampling do not.
- Limitations in the available information prevent the committee from deriving exact estimates of the AF reservists' exposure to herbicide residue.
- Herbicide residues detected on interior surfaces of three ORH C-123s provide the best available information. There is no reason to believe these aircraft are not representative of the entire fleet of ORH C-123s.
- Herbicide residues on interior surfaces would have remained mobile in an enclosed environment, meaning that AF reservists could have been exposed through multiple routes.
- All of the results of interior surface samples fall in or above the cautionary range for adverse health outcomes as defined by international guidelines.

Key Findings

1. The AF reservists would have experienced some exposure to chemicals from herbicide residue when working inside ORH C-123s.

2. Surface levels at the time of the reservists' exposure could not be extrapolated from the sampling measurements gathered long after the reservists had worked in the aircraft, but levels must have been at least as high as the available sampling results.

3. It is plausible that, at least in some cases (which cannot be associated with specific individuals), the reservists' exposure exceeded health guidelines for workers in enclosed settings. Thus, some reservists quite likely experienced non-trivial increases in their risks of adverse health outcomes.

The findings — from a group led by Harvard Public Health expert Robert Herrick — are a hard-fought victory for a small group of former service members who have lobbied for years to be included among those presumed to be exposed to Agent Orange as a result of their military service. Led by retired Air Force Maj. Wes Carter, the members of the C-123 Veterans Association have pushed the Veterans Affairs Department to recognize illnesses they've developed and say are related to exposure. But VA consistently has maintained that trace amounts of dioxin on the metal surfaces in the aircraft, which were stripped of their spraying apparatus after the war, would not pose a threat to troops because it is not "biologically available for skin absorption or inhalation."

The VA's stand, according to the department's C-123 exposure website is that "although residual TCDD — the toxic substance in Agent Orange — may be detected in C-123 aircraft by sophisticated laboratory techniques many years after its use, the [VA] concluded that the existing scientific studies and reports support a low probability that TCDD was biologically available in these aircraft. Therefore, the potential for exposure to TCDD from flying or working in contaminated C-123 aircraft years after the Vietnam War is unlikely to have occurred at levels that could affect health." But according to Carter and the Vietnam Veterans of America, at least 10 C-123 crewmen who flew in the aircraft after the war have died of cancers commonly linked to Agent Orange. And with many of his former colleagues ill or dying, Carter expanded his lobbying efforts to veterans service organizations, Congress and academia to help obtain health care and, if those sickened rate it, compensation.

In early 2014, VA paid the IOM \$500,000 to study the issue and put the controversy to rest. But the report's conclusions do not support VA's long-maintained position. In developing the report, panel members reviewed existing

evidence, public input, interviews with experts and existing tests performed on the aircraft. The group found that while the evidence is limited, the data indicate that the Reserve members could have been exposed through multiple routes and "some reservists quite likely experienced non-trivial increases in their risks of adverse health outcomes." The findings, which the VA received 8 JAN, have stirred action within the Veterans Affairs Department. The VA has 60 days to respond to the report, but on receipt of it Thursday, officials held the first meeting of a working group to address related issues and is planning follow-up action.

Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson attended the working group meeting, and VA Undersecretary for Benefits Allison Hickey was to be briefed Friday on the findings as well, according to VA officials. "I can't speak for [Hickey] but I know it is an important issue for her," said VA Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning Dr. Linda Schwartz during a public briefing on the report at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. Schwartz said in addition to determining who has been affected, VA must also assess whether legislative action is needed to offer them health care and benefits. In its report, the panel did not weigh in on whether the VA should approve compensation claims filed by C-123 veterans but noted in strong, unequivocal language that the veterans were exposed. Following the briefing, Carter, who has cancer and heart disease he believes is linked to Agent Orange exposure, said he was relieved by the findings and hopes for swift action from VA.

"[Retired Air Force Brig.] General Hickey said she'd go by the decision of the IOM ... [VA] needs to act quickly, because this is not solely about compensation. These are veterans who should have been entitled to medical care at the VA and those doors were shut," Carter said. He noted that as a military retiree who was injured during the Persian Gulf War, he already is eligible for VA care. The fight, he said, was for those who are gravely ill and have no health benefits or can't work because of their illnesses. With the new decision by the IOM panel, he hopes they'll get help, he said. "This was my last trip to D.C.," he said. "And it was worth it." [Source: <http://tinyurl.com/nx8soc7> & AF Times | Institute of Medicine & Patricia Kime | Jan 08 & 09, 2015 ++]

VA Claims Backlog Update ► 2015 Goal out of Reach

The Department of Veterans Affairs likely will not eliminate a backlog in benefits claims by the end of 2015, according to Army Times. Despite cutting the backlog in half since the start of 2013, the agency is not processing the claims fast enough to reach what has long been an agency goal. The publication said VA workers completed more than 1.3 million claims in 2014, a record, and has cut the backlog to 245,000, which is a drop of 250,000 from the start of 2013. But new claims come in at an increasing pace and will prevent the VA from cutting through the entire backlog. "I think they can get close, but I don't think they can get to zero," Jackie Maffucci, the research director for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, told the publication last week. "Just looking at the numbers, it's doubtful."

Congress gave the VA an additional \$40 million in the budget passed last month to address the backlog with digital scanning, additional claims processors and other efforts. Maffucci said the issue is still an important one for veterans. She said, "Keeping that promise still matters." Army Times said a new backlog is on the horizon. Appeals have risen steadily from about 245,000 in March 2013 to 287,000 today. Congress gave the agency an additional \$11 million to address this problem, the publication reported. [Source: NGAUS Washington Report Jan. 06, 2015 ++]

VA 2014 Accomplishments

Last year was a roller coaster year for VA. The early months of 2014, saw VA chugging upward hacking away at the claims backlog, improving access for mental health care, home loans and providing record benefits to Veterans and their family members. In March, the Department celebrated 25 years as a cabinet level agency.

But in May, the Phoenix scandal overshadowed all of those accomplishments. Acting Secretary Sloan Gibson took the helm and immediately ordered for VA to come clean, providing full disclosure to the public about any and all discrepancies it uncovered. Secretary Bob McDonald continued that level of transparency and began a push to regain the trust of Veterans – visiting with Veterans from coast-to-coast – listening to their needs, their complaints and their ideas for

improvement. He orders accountability and immediate action and, through the MyVA initiative, is helping VA work to ensure Veterans are in control of how, when and where they want to be served.

The VA's biggest success of 2014 may arguably be the wakeup call that is leading the much needed change well into the new year; however, it cannot be overlooked what was accomplished by the vast majority of employees and volunteers that embody VA's I CARE (<http://www.va.gov/ICARE>) core values and their sense of duty to our nation's Veterans. Their top accomplishments follow:

1. I CARE. Sec. Bob McDonald asked all VA employees and volunteers to recommit themselves to the principles of I CARE. These values — Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence — define our culture and strengthen our dedication to those we serve. They provide a baseline for the standards of behavior expected of all VA employees.

2. Medical appointments on track. Nationally, VA has completed 24 million appointments between June 1, 2014 and Oct. 31, 2014, which is a 1.4 million increase over the same time period in 2013.

3. Private-sector care for Veterans. VA made nearly 1.2 million authorizations for Veterans to receive care in the private sector from June 1, 2014 through Oct. 31, 2014, nearly doubling (48 percent increase) the authorizations made during the same period in 2013.

4. Building for the future. In 2014, VA activated 93 buildings, which resulted in 1,420,884 additional square feet for clinical, mental health, long-term care facilities, and administrative space.

5. Excellence in Service. For the fourth consecutive year, VA's Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy received the highest customer satisfaction score among the nation's public and private mail-order pharmacies, according to a J.D. Power study.

6. GI Bill turned 70, continues to change lives. VA celebrated the 70th anniversary of the GI Bill of Rights in 2014. In FY 2014, they provided more than \$10.8 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to Servicemembers, Veterans, and their families to enhance their economic opportunities. Since the inception of the program in 2009, more than \$47 billion has been paid to more than 1.3 million Post-9/11 GI Bill participants (as of Dec. 1, 2014). In FY14, as part of the GI Bill of Rights, VA guaranteed 440,000 home loans totaling \$100 billion, while also assisting 80,000 Veterans in avoiding foreclosure, saving taxpayers over \$2.7

billion. VBA has maintained the lowest foreclosure rate for 25 consecutive quarters when compared to all other types of home loans.

7. More benefits for families and survivors. VA expanded the eligibility criteria for the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship to include the surviving spouses of Servicemembers who died in the line of duty after Sept. 10, 2001. VA began accepting applications by mail for the Fry Scholarship under the newly expanded eligibility criteria on Nov. 3, 2014.

8. VA Cemeteries tops in customer satisfaction. For the fifth consecutive time, VA's National Cemetery Administration topped the American Customer Satisfaction Index's (ACSI) independent survey of customer satisfaction. NCA achieved a customer satisfaction index of 96, the highest ACSI score in either the private or public sector in the history of the survey.

9. VA employees continue to work on the claims backlog. In FY 2014, VA decided a record-breaking 1,320,870 disability compensation and pension (rating) claims for Veterans and Survivors – the highest in VA history. Veterans waited, on average, 119 fewer days to receive a decision on their claims compared to the previous year. The claims backlog (any claim older than 125 days) has also been reduced from the peak of 611,000 in March 2013 to 239,000 as of Nov. 30, 2014 – a 61 percent reduction and lowest number of backlogged claims in four years.

10. Fully Developed Claims exceeding goals. VA continues to exceed goals with regard to Fully Developed Claims. In FY 2014, 39 percent of claims received were submitted as Fully Developed Claims, up from three percent at initiative start in 2012.

11. More Veterans and families sign up for eBenefits. By the end of FY2014, VA had registered 4.2 million Servicemembers, Veterans, and family members in eBenefits. In addition, approximately 2,000 VSO representatives have credentials for accessing eBenefits through VBA's new Stakeholder Enterprise Portal, which enables them to file online compensation claims on behalf of Veterans.

12. VA goes digital. Under VA's technology initiatives, one major achievement has been its transition from an outmoded paper-intensive process to a fully electronic processing system, the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). Previously VA processed 5,000 tons of paper per year; now it is processing 93 percent of the disability claims inventory electronically. VA has converted over 1 billion documents to digital images that are being maintained in Veterans' electronic claim folders. In FY 2014, 1.4 million rating decisions and 820,000 claims were completed using VBMS.

13. VA keeps reducing the number of homeless Veterans. VA, together with federal, state, and local partners, reduced the estimated number of homeless Veterans by 33 percent as noted in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) 2014 Point-in-Time (PIT) Estimate of Homelessness. In FY 2014 alone, VA provided services to more than 260,000 homeless or at-risk Veterans in VHA's homeless programs. Not all Veterans required an intensive homeless program intervention, but for those that did, nearly 71,500 Veterans were either placed in permanent housing or prevented from becoming homeless.

14. VA hires more mental healthcare professionals. VA hired 782 psychologists and psychiatrists in 2014 as well as 257 other mental health providers, such as social workers, nurses and licensed professional counselors, and 45 mental health administrative support employees. These professionals are filling new positions and existing vacancies to meet the growing requirements for mental health services.

15. Veterans Crisis Line expanded to help more Veterans. In response to the President's Executive Order, VA expanded the capacity of the Veterans Crisis Line by 50 percent, and enhanced its partnerships with community mental health providers. In FY 2014, the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) answered 374,050 phone calls, assisted 64,593 people through chat services and 13,463 people through text services. VCL responders assisted in sending emergency services (rescue) to 9,719 Veterans. Call volume answered by VCL in 2014 increased by 30 percent. Chat contacts increased by 18 percent, and Text contacts increased by 19 percent.

16. VA expands care for Veterans with military sexual trauma. Under authority from VACAA, VA expanded eligibility for Veterans in need of mental health care due to military sexual trauma (MST) that occurred during their military service. The expansion primarily pertains to Reservists and National Guard members participating in weekend drill, gives the authority to offer Veterans the appropriate care and services needed to treat conditions resulting from MST that occurred during a period of inactive duty training.

17. More healthcare options for women Veterans. VA has enhanced provision of care to women Veterans by focusing on the goal of developing Designated Women's Health Providers (DWHP) at every site where women access VA. VA has trained over 2,000 providers in women's health and is in the process of training additional providers to ensure that every woman Veteran has the opportunity to receive her primary care from a DWHP. VA now operates a Women Veterans Call Center (WVCC), created to contact women Veterans and let them know about the

services they may be eligible for. From April 2013 to April 2014 the WVCC received over 9,600 incoming calls and made over 93,000 outbound calls.

18. VA to reorganize and improve. VA is working to reorganize the department for success, guided by ideas and initiatives from Veterans, employees, and all of our stakeholders. This reorganization is a part of the MyVA initiative and is designed to provide Veterans with a seamless, integrated, and responsive customer service experience. The Department developed the Blue Print for Excellence- a detailed vision of how VA will evolve as a model national health care provider delivering both excellent health care and an excellent experience of care to all Veterans served.

19. Enhancing accountability. In 2014, VA established the Office of Accountability Review to ensure leadership accountability for improprieties related to patient scheduling and access to care, whistleblower retaliation, and related matters that impact public trust in VA. The U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) certified VA under their Whistleblower Protection Certification Program after VA worked to achieve compliance and protect employees who identify or report problems from unlawful retaliation. VA also worked closely with OSC to successfully resolve whistleblower retaliation complaints filed by three individuals from the VA Phoenix Health Care System. In 2014, VA also began posting regular data updates that show progress in efforts to accelerate access to quality health care for Veterans who have been waiting for appointments. This data includes both pending and completed appointments at the facility level.

20. VA looks to recruit the best and brightest in the medical field. VA faces a competitive market to recruit and retain highly skilled health care providers, particularly mental health specialists, given the growing demand for these jobs in the private sector. Complex hiring processes for clinicians, to include requirements for boarding, credentialing, privileging, physicals, security/backgrounds, add to the department's challenge. We are working to close the pay gap between VA and private sector clinicians to make VA an employer of choice.

21. VA listening to Veterans and VA employees. In the aftermath of Phoenix, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Bob McDonald instructed all VA facilities to hold town hall meetings to engage Veterans as well as the VA employees that serve them. As a result of that first round of meetings coast-to-coast, Secretary McDonald mandated quarterly town hall meetings as a way to continue to improve communications with Veterans. These quarterly town-hall events are an

important step toward improving the delivery of benefits and services and rebuilding trust among all those VA serves.

Looking Forward to 2015

While many recognize these milestones, VA continues to tackle the challenges of the department. It also embraces the opportunities for transformation that they bring. To achieve lasting success for the department, VA must develop a strategy for meeting an increased demand for services and benefits, and for meeting the needs of a changing Veteran population. This includes preparing for the increasing numbers of women Veterans coming to VA for care; looking at the unique needs of post-9/11 Veterans; and using innovative approaches to reach every Veteran who needs services. Sec. Bob McDonald wrote in the Baltimore Sun in October *"Veterans need VA, and many more Americans benefit from VA."* By focusing on three fundamental priorities in 2015 – rebuilding trust, improving service by putting the Veteran first, and setting the course for longer-term excellence and reform – VA's employees can better serve our Veterans and the American people. [Source: VAntagee Point | Reynaldo Leal | Jan. 01, 2015 ++]

Veterans Employment Center Update ►

Transitioning Aid

The Veteran Employment Center (VEC) is an online portal that combines elements of standard job boards and professional connection media (e.g. LinkedIn) to provide a single solution for meeting the needs of both veteran job-seekers and employers seeking to hire our veterans. The VEC is accessible from the Veteran's Administration's e-Benefits website <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/jobs>. Soldiers, veterans, and family members are encouraged to create a VEC profile early! Their Soldier for Life - Transition Assistance Program (SFL-TAP) offices, career counselors, and Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) benefit advisors can assist in getting started with the VEC and job search related skills training. The eBenefits portal is a safe, secure, and centralized resource for benefits associated with pre-separation, employment assistance, relocation, education and training, health and life insurance, finances, Reserve affiliation, disabled veterans, and retirement. Navigating to the VEC provides access to the career tools, employment resources, and services for the job seeker. The Army continues to align with agencies like the VA and U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) to improve the VEC's functionality while advancing the

responsibilities, objectives, and policies supporting the VEC's use within the transition life cycle while continuing to highlight the benefits of the VEC:

- The VEC is open to all Reserve & National Guard members, veterans, spouses, and dependents.
- Job seeker access to real job opportunities and the tools to build profiles to be shared with employers committed publically to a hiring goal and public tracking of the progress made.
- Offers employers a free platform to connect with the Army and post job openings, search job-seeker profiles, directly contact prospective employees, and make public employment commitments.
- Contains an integrated private and public sector military skills translator that helps members describe their skills and experience in terms that employers understand and value.
- Is a central hub for VA-vetted partnerships. Examples include: LinkedIn (a professional network) is offering a free one-year Job Seeker subscription that increases contacts through their network; Coursera (an education platform) is offering one free credential to top off skills as well as teaming with the VA to open 20 learning hubs across the country.

The Army is currently working on a more refined adoption strategy to help transitioning offices standardize training and use of VEC supporting the SFL-TAP curriculum. Soon, TAP managers and SFL Centers will fully implement the VEC for transitioning Soldiers. The VA is available to provide comprehensive coaching and training at no cost. Establishing a VEC profile early will help Soldiers and veterans reduce their reliance on unemployment compensation for ex-Service members (UCX) and help Soldiers, veterans, and family members connect with top-of-the-line resources and opportunities leading to meaningful employment. UCX provides temporary, weekly income to Service members as they look for work, including those who can find only part-time work. [Source: Stand-To! | U.S. Army | Jan 09, 2015 ++]